

# From Newcomer to Educator: A Journey of Transformative Onboarding

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**Abstract:** The paper delves into the transformative onboarding practices essential for successfully integrating new teachers into higher education institutions. Integration of the principles of organizational socialization and transformative learning theories underscores the significance of a structured and supportive onboarding process. The paper argues that a comprehensive approach, including mentorship, targeted professional development, and a culture that encourages reflection and dialogue, is vital for new teachers' professional growth and institutional engagement. It concludes that effective onboarding not only facilitates a smooth transition for new teachers but also enriches the academic environment, fostering a community of continuous learning and innovation.

**Keywords:** Onboarding; New teachers; Organizational socialization; Transformative learning

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## 1. Introduction

Onboarding, which is the process of integrating new hires into an organization, is crucial for the success of both the employee and the institution, particularly in the context of higher education <sup>[1]</sup>. As academic institutions navigate an increasingly competitive landscape, the need for effective onboarding programs has become more pronounced. Effective onboarding has been shown to have a significant impact on the success and retention of new faculty and staff in higher education institutions, with studies finding that comprehensive onboarding programs can lead to increased job satisfaction, improved performance, and higher rates of retention among new hires <sup>[2]</sup>. This is particularly important given the critical role that the recruitment and development of high-quality faculty and staff play in supporting the educational mission and reputation of academic institutions. Moreover, onboarding plays a crucial role in supporting the individual needs of international faculty and staff, who often face additional challenges in adapting to their new academic environment, and effective onboarding programs can help these individuals navigate these complexities and foster a sense of belonging <sup>[3]</sup>. The better understanding higher education institutions have towards new teacher onboarding, the better bridge they may provide for them to adapt to the new academic environment successfully.

## 2. Understanding new teacher onboarding from the point of organizational socialization

Socialization is generally understood as “a learning process by which an individual develops as a social being and a member of a society or group”<sup>[4]</sup>. The onboarding of new teachers in universities can be understood from the perspective of organizational socialization theory, which emphasizes the process by which new employees learn the values, norms, and behaviors necessary to become effective, contributing members of the organization<sup>[5]</sup>. Organizational socialization refers to a process at the group level whereby individuals acquire the knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes necessary for successful participation in a workplace, and move from being outsiders to being members of an organization<sup>[6]</sup>. This process is critical for fostering an inclusive environment that supports newcomers in adapting to their roles and enhances their overall integration into the academic community.

The process of organizational socialization, through which newcomers “learn the ropes” of a particular role, is essential for their successful integration into a new workplace<sup>[5]</sup>. This socialization process is particularly crucial for new teachers as they transition into the education sector. The socialization of organizational newcomers can be described as occurring in three main phases: “anticipatory socialization,” “accommodation,” and “role management”<sup>[7]</sup>. During the accommodation phase, new hires often perceive significant ambiguity in their new environment, leading to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, schools need to provide structured onboarding programs that can effectively reduce these ambiguities and anxieties at this early stage. This resonates with the four prevalent theoretical assumptions identified by Chao (2012)<sup>[4]</sup> in the process of new people’s organizational socialization: uncertainty reduction, the need to belong, social exchange theory, and social identity theory. Thus, from the point of new teachers, if there is no adequate support, their initial adjustive learning will turn out maladaptive.

From the organizational perspective, the entry of new teachers should be viewed as a mutual adaptation process, where both the institution and the individual teacher change<sup>[5]</sup>. This highlights the importance of a collaborative and adaptive approach to onboarding, rather than a one-way transfer of information. As identified by Klein et al. (2008)<sup>[8]</sup>, there are three key antecedents to successful newcomer adjustment that schools should carefully consider when designing their new teacher onboarding programs: (1) Organizational practices and tactics, (2) social agents with whom the new hire interact, and (3) the newcomer’s agency. By recognizing these factors, educational institutions can create more effective onboarding experiences that foster a sense of belonging and enhance overall job satisfaction for new teachers.

Universities should develop a comprehensive onboarding program that covers both administrative tasks (e.g., payroll, benefits, IT setup) and pedagogical support (e.g., course design, teaching methods, research guidance). The dual focus is essential for ensuring that new faculty members are not only equipped with the necessary logistical tools but also supported in their teaching and research roles. Additionally, clear and consistent communication about the institution’s mission, values, policies, and expectations for new faculty members is vital. Such communication helps to align newcomers with the organizational culture and reduces uncertainty during their transition<sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, universities should offer structured training and professional development opportunities to help them understand the academic culture, systems, and best practices within the institution<sup>[9]</sup>. Ensuring that the onboarding process is well-organized, streamlined, and tailored to the needs of individual new faculty members is crucial for facilitating a smooth transition. By investing in a comprehensive onboarding experience, institutions can foster an environment that promotes engagement and belonging for their new hires.

An important antecedent to successful onboarding is the social agents with whom the new hire interacts.

Universities should assign each new faculty member a dedicated mentor who can provide guidance, support, and feedback throughout the onboarding process. They should also encourage collaboration and networking among new faculty members, as well as with experienced colleagues, to foster a sense of community and shared learning. Facilitating regular check-ins and feedback sessions between new faculty members and their department heads or administrators can also help address any concerns or challenges that may arise, ensuring that newcomers feel supported in their transition.

The newcomer's agency plays a critical role in successful onboarding. Institutions should empower new faculty members to take an active role in their own onboarding and professional development, encouraging them to seek out resources, ask questions, and provide input on how the onboarding process can be improved. Recognizing and celebrating the unique expertise, research interests, and teaching approaches that new faculty members bring to the institution can also contribute to a positive and supportive onboarding experience. By fostering an environment that values both mentorship and individual agency, universities can enhance the integration of new faculty members into their academic communities<sup>[3]</sup>.

By considering these three key factors (institutional practices and tactics, social agents, and the newcomer's agency), universities can design an onboarding program that facilitates a smooth transition for new faculty members, maximizes their long-term retention and success, and ultimately benefits the entire academic community<sup>[8,10]</sup>. The organizational socialization of new teachers is a critical process that requires a well-designed and comprehensive onboarding program. By addressing the ambiguities and anxieties that often accompany the accommodation phase, institutions can better support their new hires and foster a mutually beneficial adaptation process.

### **3. Understanding new teacher onboarding from the point of transformative learning**

Transformative learning theory, developed by Jack Mezirow, suggests that adults can undergo significant shifts in their frames of reference, habits of mind, and perspectives through a process of critical reflection and experience<sup>[11-14]</sup>. This theory can be particularly relevant when analyzing the onboarding of new teachers at universities. The onboarding process can be viewed as a transformative learning experience, where the new teacher is required to critically examine their existing beliefs, assumptions, and approaches to teaching, and subsequently adapt to the new academic environment<sup>[15]</sup>.

When a new teacher joins a university, they are often faced with a range of new experiences, expectations, and challenges that can significantly impact their teaching practice and professional identity. The onboarding process can be seen as a transformative learning experience, where the new teacher is required to critically examine their existing beliefs, assumptions, and approaches to teaching, and adapt to the new academic environment. The key aspects of transformative learning theory that can be applied to the new teacher's onboarding process at universities include:

- (1) Disorienting dilemma: The transition from a previous teaching context to a new university environment can create a disorienting dilemma for the new teacher, challenging their existing frames of reference and requiring them to reassess their teaching practices.
- (2) Critical reflection: The onboarding process should create opportunities for the new teacher to engage in critical reflection on their teaching beliefs, assumptions, and approaches. This can involve activities such as mentoring, peer observation, and feedback sessions.

- (3) Dialogue and discourse: Engaging in constructive dialogue and discourse with experienced faculty, teaching and learning support staff, and peers can help new teachers explore different perspectives, challenge their assumptions, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the university's teaching and learning culture.
- (4) Transformative action: As the new teacher navigates the onboarding process, they should be encouraged to experiment with new teaching strategies, integrate feedback, and gradually transform their teaching practice to align with the university's expectations and best practices.
- (5) Developing a new frame of reference: Through the transformative learning experience of the onboarding process, the new teacher can develop a new frame of reference, or perspective, that informs their teaching philosophy, classroom management, and overall approach to their role within the university.

By applying Mezirow's transformative learning theory to the onboarding process, universities can better support new teachers in adapting to their roles and fostering an environment conducive to professional growth.

#### **4. Suggestions on supporting new teachers' effective onboarding**

Universities can take a comprehensive approach to onboarding new teachers based on the principles of organizational socialization and transformative learning. Central to this approach should be a structured onboarding program that spans the new teacher's first months of employment. This program should include orientation sessions, mentoring opportunities, peer-to-peer support, and collaborative learning activities to facilitate the new teacher's transition and integration into the university community.

Alongside the formal onboarding program, universities should also foster a supportive and inclusive culture that encourages experienced faculty to serve as mentors and role models for the new teachers. By encouraging open communication, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving, the university can create an environment that allows new teachers to feel welcomed, valued, and empowered to share their perspectives and challenges. Facilitating critical reflection and dialogue is crucial, as it enables new teachers to engage in self-reflection on their teaching beliefs, assumptions, and approaches, while also engaging in constructive discussions with experienced faculty to challenge their perspectives and develop a more nuanced understanding of the university's teaching and learning culture.

To further support the onboarding process, universities should provide targeted professional development opportunities that address the specific needs and challenges faced by new teachers, such as classroom management, course design, and student engagement. These workshops and training sessions should be complemented by peer observation, co-teaching, and other collaborative learning experiences that encourage experimentation and the integration of feedback. By recognizing and rewarding the successful transformation and growth of new teachers during the onboarding process, universities can reinforce the value of this transformative learning experience and inspire a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching.

Finally, universities should leverage the power of technology and digital tools to enhance the onboarding process of new teachers. Online platforms and collaborative tools can facilitate virtual mentoring, peer-to-peer support, and asynchronous learning opportunities, while also encouraging new teachers to experiment with educational technology and digital pedagogies in their own classrooms. By providing access to online resources, tutorials, and communities of practice, universities can further support the ongoing professional development of their new faculty members, ensuring a smooth and successful transition into the academic environment.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, onboarding new teachers in higher education institutions is a multifaceted process that necessitates a comprehensive and strategic approach. By integrating the principles of organizational socialization and transformative learning, universities can create a structured and supportive environment that facilitates not only the initial transition but also promotes long-term professional development. The success of such programs depends on clear communication, mentorship, collegial support, and opportunities for reflection on practice and shared learning. Through these initiatives, institutions can empower new faculty to navigate the complex academic landscape and contribute to a vibrant and dynamic educational community. Ultimately, effective onboarding is not just a means to an end, but an investment in the future of the institution, ensuring that new teachers are well-equipped to meet the evolving demands of higher education and enrich the academic experience for all involved.

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